

W r e s t l i n g

P e r s p e c t i v e

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The Nature Boy Still Has Flair

By - David Skolnick

The old gray Flair, he ain't what he used to be. There's no denying the "Nature Boy" is a step or two slower and is starting to show the signs of a man in his mid-40s who has given his all in more than 20 years of wrestling. It's obvious that Ric Flair is relying on the moves that got him 11 or 12 or how many world titles he's held (as if the last three or so have actually meant anything) and the pressures of dealing with the everyday politics of WCW have taken its toll on him. Can you imagine having to deal with Eric Bischoff and going home everyday with your dignity and sanity?

Yet, even with all the criticism and the additional stress that comes with being a high-level official and the lead heel of a company that is unsuccessfully challenging the top promotion in the United States, Flair is still one of the best workers and probably the hardest worker in this country today. In this day and age of Mabels, Yokozunas, Typhoons and other lousy workers being pushed as the new generation, that may not be much of a compliment, but the business does boast athletes like Bret Hart, Sean Michaels, Owen Hart, 1-2-3 Kid, Steve Austin and Ricky Steamboat who know how to work. Despite what the "Hit Man" claims, Flair is still among the elite wrestlers in this business.

Wrestling writers have recently criticized Flair for living off his name. The criticism probably should have started a few years ago, but when you're the darling of the hardcores, faults often get overlooked. Just ask Eddie Gilbert and Jim Ross, two of the most over-rated talents in wrestling. Flair does deserve some of the criticism he's been hearing lately. He should be doing more in the ring, but there's no denying what he executes, he executes well during every match. Also, his matches at the big shows always finish first or near the top of polls in the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* or *Pro Wrestling Torch* for the best match of any particular card. Many argue that Flair's *Starrcade* match with Vader was the best of 1993 and he has received praise for his recent series with Steamboat, Sting and the Clash bout last year when he teamed with Arn Anderson against Austin and Brian Pillman. When a show is built around him, such as the *Starrcade* pay-per-view or the *Bash at the Beach* against Hulk Hogan, Flair shows why he is the most consistent old pro in the business. When the money is on the line, there is no one else who consistently comes through more often than Flair. It wasn't too long ago that the powers-that-be planned to relegate Flair to the middle of the card. Fortunately, they saw the errors of their ways. Even though he has done little, if anything, to increase arena attendance, WCW would be in a disastrous situation today without Flair. Admittedly, Flair is not the wrestler he was in the eighties, but even his bad matches are superior to most everything being shown by the WWF or WCW.

For the past decade, Flair has been the favorite of hardcores. Recently, however, there has been a trend to attack Flair for failing to try new spots and for depending on a set format that made him the country's best wrestler. Yet these people still give Flair's matches three and four stars. Why? Quite simply, Flair still puts on solid performances and carries himself better than anyone else. Times have changed with many innovative moves and bumps becoming commonplace. In the process, the art of matwork has gone the way of the dinosaur with only a handful of wrestlers including Flair and Steamboat practicing it and at times, being criticized for it. Even though he's had to follow hot matches featuring Too Cold Scorpio and Cactus Jack doing one suicidal move after another, Flair has not only held his own, but through ring psychology, brought the crowd to their feet on several occasions.

Some have criticized Flair for his interviews as they are the same ones he's been giving for the past decade reciting the same lines. How many of us can follow along at home dropping catch phrases like: "Styling and profiling;" "Diamonds are forever and so is Ric Flair;" "I'm a limousine-riding, jet-flying, kiss-stealing, wheeling-dealing, son-of-a-gun," "I'm a 60-minute man and I go all night

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long," etcetera, etcetera, etcetera? But at the same time, how many of us shout out "Whoo" every time Flair appears on the TV screen? Admittedly, Flair relies on what got him to the dance, but when he needs to, he can completely change directions. In hyping the *Starrcade* match with Vader, Flair gave down-to-earth, serious and personal interviews that have yet to be matched by anyone. Many people got chills listening to Flair talk about the plane crash 20 years ago that nearly killed him or about working with the late Kerry

Von Erich. In many people's minds, those interviews made *Starrcade* the rare WCW success it was.

Over four years ago, *Wrestling Perspective* published an article speculating on who would be the wrestler of the nineties. In the article, it was mentioned that no one could be to this decade what Flair was to the eighties. That is still true. But as we come close to the halfway point of this decade, no one has proven to be the dominant wrestler. In fact, if you had to list the top

contenders, Flair would be near, if not at the top. I'm not saying when I watch Flair in the ring today, I see the same man who had dozens of classic matches with Steamboat, Sting, Terry Funk, Magnum T.A., Barry Windham and Dusty Rhodes. No, Flair can probably no longer carry the Junkyard Dog to a three-star match. But when you look at the way many of the stars of a decade ago have deteriorated or are no longer around, Flair shows why he's the best ever. Even in the twilight of his career, he's still outshining most everyone else today.

In Perspective: Dory Funk Jr.

In the final part of a June 17 interview, former NWA Champion Dory Funk Jr. discusses his feelings on the current state of wrestling and who he considers to be the top workers past and present. Funk also discusses his tenures as bookers in the Mid-Atlantic and Florida territories and his days as "Hoss" in the WWF. The wrestling legend also talks about women and blacks in the business.

Wrestling Perspective: What's your feelings on the current state of wrestling in the United States today? Is it on its way back?

Dory Funk Jr.: It's passing itself in different directions (laughs). If it's not going to leave, it's going to be here. Occasionally, they'll do some things right and business is very good. Occasionally, they'll slip. We don't have the steady great business that Vince Jr. had, oh, even during the time I was there with Terry. There was very steady, great business at that time. Hogan and Andre the Giant did great business. Before that, Crockett's territory, Mid-Atlantic, was a great place. There was a time when Florida was a great place. There was a time when Verne Gagne's territory was a great place. They all had their time. It's always one going down and another going up.

WP: Why did so many of them die? Did they burn out the area?

DF: Ahh, I'd say a lack of cooperation among promoters was one.

WP: Caused by McMahon going national?

DF: Well, that's a fair thing to do (laughs). That's not unfair. That's not illegal. But doing silly things like going head-up in towns and fighting over buildings and things like that. I know in Japan, there are many companies doing well and three companies doing great. It filters up to one to do the best job and consistently do the best business. All Japan does a fabulous job. When people come, they know they're going to be entertained and get a great show. They're going to see winners and they're going to see losers. They may walk out disappointed, but they're not going to walk out pissed (laughs). They're going to get a fair shot at it. They're for sure, going to be happy some of the time. They may not get everything they want, but they're certainly going to walk out of there entertained by having seen a bunch of people work very, very hard.

WP: I assume you've seen All Japan Women.

DF: (laughs) No, I haven't. I'm sorry I haven't seen them. I've heard that they're absolutely fabulous.

WP: If you haven't seen them, I guess you

can't have an opinion on them.

DF: Well, all the women will be upset at me, but I think I'm not sure women should be in the ring wrestling. I think it's a man's sport. I don't think they should have women boxers either. I know we have a few, but they don't play football either.

WP: So all my women readers are going to love you.

DF: (laughs) Oh, yeah, yeah.

WP: Like you've said, you've worked all over the country. You also booked for Mid-Atlantic and ran the Amarillo territory with Terry.

DF: For Florida, Eddie Graham, and Mid-Atlantic. Mid-Atlantic was '83 to the end of '84, about a year and a half. Terry and I were part-owners of Amarillo. It was a lot of work. It was a good business. In fact, we never had a week where we saw a loss. My father had the business first and then Terry and I got involved. I first started running it in '67 right on through the sale to Mulligan and Murdoch in either '75 or '76. In 1980, I went to Florida to book for Eddie Graham.

WP: You hear so many good things about him being a brilliant mind in the business.

DF: He had a brilliant mind for wrestling. He made you feel real good about yourself. He had a good idea of what people wanted.

From him is where I got the idea to give people something extra. Give them something they don't think they're going to get. Quite often, he'd put on extra matches or change a match. People thought they were going to see a regular match, he'd change it to a Texas Death match that night. He'd give them something extra that night.

WP: Who were some of the talent at the time?

DF: The Brisco Brothers, Ric Flair, he did a great job as did Butch Reed, Sweet Brown Sugar.

WP: You also worked with David Von Erich.

DF: David Von Erich was my partner. He was a great kid, a great athlete. He had a great attitude. A good, hard worker. Long, lean and lanky. He didn't back off from anybody.

WP: In my opinion, he had the most promise of any of the Von Erich brothers.

DF: I think so, yes.

WP: A lot of that had to do with the time he left his father and went to work in Florida.

DF: He did a great job in Florida. He really did. He was our key to the young kids. They really liked him.

WP: If tragedy hadn't stepped in, what did you think his future would have been?

DF: Well, I tell you what, that whole family is a shock to me the way things ended up the way they did. As I grew up, Fritz Von Erich was a very competent wrestler. I watched his kids come up. They were really great. Things really started to fall apart with David's death. Evidently, they got on a roller coaster and couldn't get off. David was a great champion. He was a great wrestler. He had a tremendous following. A good personality. A good-hearted kid and that leaks over into your fans. When people are like that, the fans can pick up on it.

WP: Here was a kid who had name recognition because of his father, but you

were a former world champion...

DF: Yeah, but it was David too. He had name recognition because of his father. But in Florida, they really didn't know him.

WP: Why did you tag with him? Was there something in him you saw right away?

DF: I liked him. That's just a natural thing. I liked his father too. Why did I team with him? Besides his name and all that, he's 6-foot, 7-inches tall tough kid with a good personality, good on interviews. He was a good talker. He used to call me Mr. Funk on the air. I used to love that. They grew up younger than me in the same area. Their old man told them, "You gotta call everyone older than you mister." They were brought up that way. I really can't tell you where things went wrong with the family. I really can't. I knew those kids and they were great kids.

WP: From Florida, you went to the Mid-Atlantic.

DF: Yeah, Charlotte, North Carolina, with Japan in between. I was going there all the time. Worked for Jimmy Crockett Jr.

WP: You tagged with Jimmy Valiant.

DF: Quite a few times with Jimmy Valiant. With a lot of people because they had great talent. We were very fortunate. Greg Valentine, who went on to be a great talent; Ric Flair was there; Ricky Steamboat, the Brisco Brothers.

WP: Kernodle and Slaughter.

DF: Kernodle and Slaughter. Roddy Piper was there. Jimmy Valiant, Harley Race, Blanchard started out there, Kabuki and Sweet Brown Sugar was there.

WP: What happened with him?

DF: He was a great athlete. He was a state high-jump champion in Texas. I don't know. Our business is a little bit backwards in its racial balance. I don't mind saying that. I don't think that wrestling has given the great black athletes a chance to shine.

WP: In many ways, his tag partner, Butch Reed, also started out hot and fizzled.

DF: Yeah. I think we would serve our business well if we would not especially look for black athletes, but look for the greatest athletes coming out of junior college and college.

WP: Regardless of their color.

DF: Yeah, if you just go grab the great ones, you're going to have a heck of a lot of black ones aren't you? They're missing somewhere.

WP: Too Cold Scorpio, who was recently fired by WCW, said on a radio show that there just isn't the opportunity for black wrestlers.

DF: You don't even have to think about black wrestlers. There isn't enough support for the great athletes. If you were picking the great athletes, you would have your black athletes.

WP: When I think of black wrestlers, I think of Junkyard Dog, who had his day. But none have come since then.

DF: Yes, true.

WP: Why did you leave Mid-Atlantic?

DF: There's always a time to move on. This is in booking or this is in wrestling. There's always a time to come and there's always a time to go. It just worked that way. I had booked Florida on a previous occasion.

WP: You went back again.

DF: Yeah, I went back to Florida. I worked there three times for Eddie Graham. When you're having your run and things are good, well, even while they're still good, it might be the best time to go (laughs). Certainly, you don't want to leave when things are bad.

WP: Which in this day and age is happening more often than not.

DF: (laughs) Yeah, sure. You ruin your reputation that way.

WP: You worked with Mike Rotunda in Florida a lot.

DF: In Florida, many times. I think Mike's had a great break up in New York.

WP: You think so?

DF: If you measure his break by his money, he's doing great.

WP: Is he among the best scientific wrestlers in the business today?

DF: Yeah, I'd say he's among the best. Yeah, I really would. I think so.

WP: Speaking of the WWF and different gimmicks that they put on people, why don't you tell me how you ended up working for them?

DF: They called me and asked if I would come up there. Terry was there and again, it was much like in Philadelphia, there was a demand to see the brothers together. George Scott was the booker and he was the one who called me. So I went up there and had a very successful run about nine months.

WP: Did you like it?

DF: Very much.

WP: Comparing mat wrestling against Jack Brisco to some of the antics that you had to do for the WWF like the Alfred Hayes barbecue skit...

DF: Yeah, but you still remember that.

WP: How could you forget that?

DF: Then how could it have been bad (laughs)? It must have been one of the best. Tell me another one they did up there? That must have been really good. How could you say it was bad? Lord Hayes was an old friend of mine and I loved the chance to pour that stuff all over him (laughs). So how could you possibly say it was bad?

WP: So I guess you were quite comfortable doing it?

DF: I was quite comfortable, yes.

WP: You were working with Jesse Barr. Good wrestler?

DF: Yeah, a good wrestler.

WP: But not a Funk.

DF: No, no, not a Funk. Not a Funk.

WP: What do you think of McMahon?

DF: I enjoyed working for him very much. I think he does an excellent job.

WP: A visionary?

DF: A visionary? Yeah, I would say so.

WP: Or just a guy who had a real good plan which is nothing to knock?

DF: Ahh, how could you knock success? There were a lot of guys who made money during that time. Fortunately, for the period of time I was there, myself and Terry included. What's wrong if they want to give you a nickname? Give me a nickname. Call me Hoss. Is there a problem with that?

WP: You tell me?

DF: They didn't change my name (laughs). I still had the same last name. No, I enjoyed very much working for him. I made very good money for him and, like I said before, there's a time to come and a time to go. Terry felt his time to go was before I left. So Jesse Barr became my partner and we had a short run after that and then it was time to go. The time I was up there, I made very good money and I was very happy. Vince Jr. and the people that worked for him, I've seen some very interesting cases of him taking care of the people that worked for him even when they were injured, hurt, out of work. If you worked for him, he still took care of you.

WP: From the WWF, you settled into semi-retirement.

DF: Where did I go (laughs)? After the WWF, I continued to work for Baba in Japan and we also opened a mortgage business here in Ocala. We spent three years getting started and we still do some work in the mortgage business. I have a partner that I keep my license with. We've been here three years working in the mortgage/brokerage business very hard. Along with that, working Japan in the springtime.

WP: When you do independents, what are you looking for? You can be a little selective now.

DF: Yeah, mostly I just want it to be...what you look out for is, especially if you work

independents, you want to make sure you're working for a respectable company. That you're going to get your money. And also that the respect is going to be there for workmanship.

WP: What do you think of Smoky Mountain?

DF: I think they do an excellent job. They give people a lot of what they want to see. They have to be a little bit careful. They've had some excellent talent come through. Really good boys, Luger, Savage, Rock 'n Roll Express, Heavenly Bodies, Brian Lee. Any small promotion has to be careful because good talent like that is going to be picked up by the big promotions. They've got to have their fill of new people coming in and also still got to keep these stars coming back for a period of time until the younger, new ones get established. I know they're coming up with Fan Week, they're coming up with some big shows and they'll do very, very well. They do need to be concerned about what comes next. I do know that they work with Vince and it's a good source of talent for them and they need to keep that door open. I'm not trying to give them advice.

WP: But at the same time, they lost the Bodies to them, they lost Brian Lee.

DF: The Bodies are coming back for Fan Appreciation Week.

WP: I think Cornette has a tougher job than anyone at the WWF or WCW. He's constantly got to find new talent.

DF: That's the difficulty. Everyone says why aren't there independent promotions and that's difficult to do. They get established and someone else takes their talent. For a guy with a family, there's more money in the two large promotions. They've got to make a living.

WP: There are some problems in this country with wrestling. We've spoken about the WWF and Smoky Mountain. What about WCW? What are they doing right and what are they doing wrong?

DF: Well, production is great (laughs). Ultimately, the fans are going to guide them in the right direction. You have to

give the people what they want or you won't be around. I'll just make a comment about this. They had some a lot of people for the Flair-Steamboat match in Chicago. I think it was their biggest live gate in three years and they made no attempts to follow it up. I don't know why. Steamboat and Flair will do good to great business. I think that's what the company needs. They need good, steady business. I'm sure they'll do tremendous business with Hogan-Flair. What do you think?

WP: I think they'll do well, but they rushed it.

DF: Yeah, the pressure's on the line for Hogan and Flair. If they go down there (Bash at the Beach) and if people are spending \$20 for a ticket, if they get \$40 worth of entertainment, they'll come back. If they get \$10 worth of entertainment, they may not come back. So those guys are on the line.

WP: Who do you think are some of the best workers today?

DF: Right now? The best ones right now are the three kids from All Japan, Kobashi, Misawa and Kawada. Also, Steve Williams, definitely the most improved worker out there right now would be Steve. Hansen does a great job. Terry Funk is maybe the best cause he's doing it on his own terms in the independents and major companies. He's dancing to his own tune.

WP: It shows how good he is that he can go wherever he wants.

DF: Yeah, he can go anywhere he wants to go. Baba, put his business on the line when he chose himself to step in. A great worker. Ric Flair, a hard worker. You want more?

WP: If you've got more. What do you think of some of the young workers?

DF: Chris Candido, an excellent worker. An unknown kid who does a great job over in Japan, Richard Slinger. He does a great job. Akiyama, who works for our company.

In the United States, oh, it's a shame there's not too many great ones that are young. Ricky Steamboat, add him to the list of great workers.

WP: You hear a lot lately about Sabu.

DF: You know, I haven't had a chance to see him work yet. I will see him when I go to Philly. I know he's great, but I want to see him. I've heard an awful lot about him. He definitely gives people their money's worth.

WP: Going back, who are some of the best workers you've been in the ring with?

DF: Brisco, first and foremost. I would have to say Jack Brisco. I would have to say Baba. I would have to say Inoki. A guy that just passed away, Pat O'Connor. I think Lou Thesz was great. I had great matches with him. Harley Race was great. Ric Flair.

WP: What makes him so good? You've said he's a hard worker, but what if you work hard, but you're not that good?

DF: Well I've seen Flair in the ring having his problems. But you can watch his match and just see him make the match and just keep going and work hard. I've seen him work many one-hour matches, mostly down in Florida. I've see him start to think about his next move. He just keeps going and going and pretty soon he looks like a drowned rat. He just makes it with hard work. Ric Flair is a very hard worker. Other great workers from the past, there were some local guys I used to travel with in Texas. Gene Kiniski was a hard worker. The kid that passed away, Lonnie Mayne. I used to wrestle him quite often when I went to Florida. Those are the ones.

WP: At Slamboree last year, you were in the ring with Nick Bockwinkel. What was that like?

DF: He's another great worker.

WP: Did you want to wrestle extra hard since it was in front of a large audience?

DF: I'd give them the same match if there were 35 people there. Believe me, you do (laughs). Ric Flair and Ricky Steamboat just had a great match in Charlotte, 60 minutes. I've been in the big arenas and I've been in the small arenas. I've wrestled in the Gator Bowl against Jack Brisco. I wrestled Fritz in Texas Stadium. I've been in all the big ones and I've wrestled in the little ones. I wrestled a bear in Elk City, Oklahoma, in front of about 300 people. You see them all.

WP: What's it like wrestling a bear?

DF: A bear's a very good wrestle (laughs). A good match with the bear.

WP: Anything else you want to add?

DF: No, mostly that I've really enjoyed the wrestling business. In the words of, I quote a lot of people, in the words of Gene Kiniski, "The hardest part is getting to the towns." It's a pleasure to put on your boots and go in the ring and wrestle. It should be that way. I think it you really enjoy what you're doing, people get a feeling of that. I've really had a great trip with this business and I look forward to much more. This year, I look forward to the tag team matches with Terry and myself. We haven't had a chance to do that in quite some time. I look forward to Japan in the fall. Incidentally, the college in Ocala, Central Florida College, I'm teaching Japanese.

WP: The language or the culture?

DF: You can't separate the two. You really can't.

WP: When do you see yourself finally retiring?

DF: When I die (laughs). As long as I feel good about going in the ring, I will. People love nostalgia. I don't look to retire soon (laughs). I'm quite sure we'll raise hell in Philly and I look to the next place to raise hell.

WP: Thank you very much, Dory.

If you enjoyed our interview with Dory Funk Jr., you are bound to enjoy Wrestling Perspective: The Interviews featuring in-depth interviews with Stan Lane, Billy Graham, Ivan Koloff, Robin Smith, Tommy Young, Larry Sharpe, S.D. Jones, Jim Duggan and Angelo Poffo. Wrestling Perspective: The Interviews is available for only \$10, so order today.

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Potshots From Around The World - By Bill "Potshot" Kunkel

A Question of Heat

People in the wrestling business are warped.

They don't start out that way - or at least most of them don't. But this weird, insular, inbred society we in the sheets call "the business" is a crucible, and its Heat forever melts and recasts those who pass through its portals.

Heat breaks them down.

Heat reshapes them.

Heat hardens them in their new form, a layer of glistening metal, sheathing what was once skin.

White Heat

Heat.

The good thing.

The only thing.

The thing the changelings crave. Like blood to a vampire, or dead flesh to a ghoul, wrestlers must feel the Heat in order to grow and prosper in the blood-rich soil of professional wrestling.

Oh, it's easy to understand how the change

occurs. After all, wrestling is a pseudo-sport in which one can not attain victory by dint of athletic skill, fortitude, or even cunning. "Victory" is, in fact, a blatant sham, with the winner determined solely by personal, economic, and dramatic considerations.

So what is the coin of the wrestling realm? Through what measure do we gauge success; how do we compare the performances in two different matches? Heat.

Wrestlers live for Heat. Any kind. Heel Heat is every bit as good as face Heat. Heat is

Heat; Heat is good. Heat is all. Heat is response, reaction, the meter by which the intensity of the audience interaction (wrestling was the earliest form of interactive theater) can be read.

When other grapplers heard that Jake Roberts was infuriating Lucha fans to the unheard of point where they had begun to fling loaded diapers at the heel, they were not shocked or horrified or even amused; they were envious. Green with jealousy. This man was having baby feces hurled at him and his peers stared on in absolute, stone-jealous awe.

That's how the business warps you; quality of reaction is meaningless, but quantity is everything. Big Reaction - be it a deafening roar, a riot, or getting dumped on by the diaper dandinas - is the ultimate goal of every performer in the pro wrestling arena.

Unfortunately, Heat creates illusion. Stare at a scene through a blazing fire; watch the images curl and flicker, elongate and wobble. And the feeble light cast by wrestling Heat is particularly suspicious, with its harsh shadows and high-contrast brightness creating a cataract through which it is no longer possible to objectively evaluate performance.

Look at Ric Flair-Hulk Hogan, a feeble match by any standards one would care to apply, yet the live Heat somehow elevated it in the minds of many observers. Like an instant in time illuminated by a blast of flashpowder, what actually went on in the ring is no longer as important as the afterimage locked in the audience's mind.

Black Light

That's Heat.

That's wrestling.

That's why Jimmy Cornette has introduced a pair of large, black gentlemen known as "The Gangstas" down in SMW. These fellows are heels. We know this because they say things from the ring like: "Keep up the good work baby. Two less we got to

worry about," in reference to O.J. Simpson.

How titillating! How avant-garde! How experimentally primitive! How... could he possibly do this?

We are not talking about running this angle in New York City, South Central L.A., or D.C., where these heels could wind up drawing black kids to wrestling matches, and would be considered by most white patrons, at worst, to be in questionable taste.

No, we are, in fact, talking about unveiling this incredible psychodrama in one of the country's worst economic backwaters, a social petrie dish swarming with up front rednecks, inbred morons, borderline KKK, and people who remember George Wallace and Lester Maddox... fondly.

Wrestling has no soul. It has a brain and it has a body, and sometimes it even has a heart, but it has no soul. It is a business built on deception, based on the belief that the paying public are marks, dupes, pigeons fit only for the plucking. Instruments who can be played by a skilled performer like Segovia once caressed the strings of an acoustic guitar.

Wrestling cares only for reaction, for Heat. It doesn't concern itself with anything else; feelings or desensitization or diminished humanity.

Frequently, it considers those things fringe benefits.

Up in Smoke

Jimmy Cornette is going for the Big Heat with these Gangstas of his. He believes this is his ship coming in to dock.

But what if there are riots?

Jimmy is counting on it. There have been riots before, there will be riots again. Nobody ever forgets a show with so much Heat it sparked an audience to violence. Like junkies lining up around the block to purchase from a dealer whose stuff has just over-dosed a customer, fans are drawn to shows with riot potential.

What if there *are* riots?

Jimmy expects riots. He's praying for riots, maybe worse. Maybe he even half hopes somebody takes a potshot at Nujack with a .12 gauge.

Extreme Heat is the best Heat of all.

This is, after all, Cornette's economic deliverance. After carving out a promotion from the hard rock of one of the poorest regions in America, he is still struggling. His biggest stars have either disappeared or been promoted to the big leagues. This Gangsta angle, he knows in his warped, wrestler's brain, is the Dream Idea; the magic formula that James Cornette could never sell to any promotion that wasn't run by a visionary genius like himself.

He has the power, he has the gimmick, and he has the bodies.

Now it's soul-check time, Jimmy. For the first time in his life, the darling of the hardcores, the man who can suppress stories (such as the SMW riot) in the top newsletters just by raising his voice, must ask himself: what does it profit a man to gain the Big Heat if it incinerates him and everything he's built in the process?

Because it doesn't matter.

Only one thing matters.

Just Heat.

"There is no such a thing as too much heat," Jimmy Cornette once remarked.

Heat.

Burning, cleansing, destroying, and then suffocating in its own embers.

Nothing but Heat.

Raging, chaotic, half-insane Heat.

Heat. Heat. Heat.

In Perspective: Sandy Scott

For nearly 40 years, Sandy Scott has been an active member of the wrestling community. Along with his brother, George, the Scotts are considered one of the best tag teams of all-time. After a successful career in the ring, Scott moved behind the scenes and served as a front office official for Jim Crockett Promotions. Scott was there when Crockett went national and stayed on for a few years when the NWA, later WCW, was purchased by Ted Turner. Two years ago, Scott along with Jim Cornette and Tim Horner formed Smoky Mountain Wrestling, the top regional promotion in the country. In this interview with David Skolnick, Scott, SMW's general manager, talks about his career, the top names in the business, his thoughts on the current state of wrestling and its future.

Wrestling Perspective: How did you get started in wrestling?

Sandy Scott: My brother, George, was wrestling before I did. I came out of school. I was doing amateur wrestling. This was back in the early part of the Fifties. He started in the latter part of the Forties. Actually, I joined him in about 1956, out in Calgary, Canada, as a tag team. We went on from there.

WP: So he kind of broke you in and got you trained?

SS: No, I was wrestling for the YMCA in Hamilton, where I'm originally from.

WP: So from Calgary, you worked as a team?

SS: Seven years there. From Calgary, we went to the Mid-Atlantic. Jim Crockett Sr. was running the territory.

WP: The Scotts were considered one of the best tag teams of your era. Who were some of your opponents?

SS: The Sharpe Brothers, Ben and Mike. Who else? Donny Barron and the Magnificent Maurice, Donn Lewin and into the Mid-Atlantic area, we ran into Ali Bey and his partner.

WP: There had to be a significant difference in what the territory was like then and the mid-Eighties.

SS: No, it didn't change that much. What changes is your talent. The area stayed the same. Jim Crockett Sr., he was strict and you had to make your shots. When Jim Jr. took over, he kept it, it loosened up a little bit, but he kept it on a straight line.

WP: Compare the two.

SS: The father was a man of his word. To him, a handshake was a contract. Junior was basically the same. But as you went into the Eighties, there was more of an emphasis on contracts. A lot of that was turned over to lawyers. His word, I can only speak for myself, was always 100 percent like his father.

WP: When Junior took over, was it just status quo?

SS: It went along the same way.

WP: You spent the rest of your career in the Mid-Atlantic?

SS: No, I went up to San Francisco and Arizona, went over to Australia, went to Europe.

WP: You worked for Shires?

SS: Yeah, he was very strict. He knew what he was doing. He asked 150 percent of you.

WP: Back then, did the wrestlers stick together more? In the major promotions now, it's like every man for himself.

SS: It was about the same back then. It all depended on what your position was and if you were going to make money or not. If you weren't making money, you were gone. I don't think that's any different.

WP: Before the matches, was there a lot of shooting going on?

SS: Back then, there was more back then than now.

WP: Who were the best?

SS: Oh, gosh, Fred Atkins, Lou Thesz, a guy out of Boston, I forget his name. They would want to impress. It still goes on. People want to show they're superior over other ones. There was a fellow out of Canada by the name of George Gordienko, he was over in Europe while I was there and remember, Luther Lindsey, a Black wrestler. They were pretty good shooters. When we went over to Europe, the Europeans would line their people up and they would have it more so over there than they would over here.

WP: When did you actually retire from the ring?

SS: About 1982. I was in the front office and doing a little wrestling and then, I retired from it and stayed in the front office. There was a lot of work to do. I'd be out all night wrestling and come to the office in the morning.

WP: Did you like working in the office better?

SS: I never really thought too much about it. It was a job.

WP: What did you do in the office?

SS: I booked towns, got the buildings and coliseums. I took care of the ring, went and checked up at the houses at the box office, handled publicity, almost anything to do with the town.

WP: At the time, Crockett was one of the hottest promotions in the country.

SS: It was.

WP: Then McMahon went national. What was Crockett's feelings? He wanted to compete at the latter part.

SS: At the very beginning, he went along in line. Then when he realized that McMahon got on TBS, I think then he realized he was going to have to expand. McMahon was expanding and was taking in his area. So he had to expand to ward it off a little bit,

which we never did have a problem in our area with McMahon. It was with the IWA. They came in to give us a run but they didn't do any damage at all. McMahon eventually lost TBS. My understanding was McMahon's agreement with Turner was for a live show on TBS. What McMahon did was send tapes and they wanted a live show, which they always had down there. So there, I understand and I get this just second hand, that Turner was going to put McMahon off and Jimmy heard about it and went in and got the hour or the 90-minute spot, whatever it was.

WP: Was that a big boost to the territory?

SS: It was a great boost for us because our talent then was seen all over the country. But to me, the area that we were in, it would stretch your talent out. We had one area and it would stretch your talent out and it did.

WP: The plan at that point was to go national.

SS: Not all at once. You know, ease it a little bit. An area here and there. Put your foot in the water and see what happened.

WP: Did he have a long-range plan or did he just go along?

SS: Ahh, at the end he had a long-range plan. But at the beginning, like I said, he wanted to compete with McMahon in his area and getting TBS certainly blocked McMahon.

WP: Dusty was on at that time.

SS: No, Dusty came later. At that time, I think my brother was there. My brother was doing the booking.

WP: As far as a booker, your brother has been much maligned. Jim Cornette has been one of his critics in the past. What did you think of his booking philosophy?

SS: George's? I thought it was superior. I mean he proved it. You go in cycles over there. It really dropped after the Valentine airplane crash, Flair. It really dropped and he worked away at it and he brought it up and he had it at the top of its peak for years.

WP: I think the complaint from people was after the Turner buyout and he was brought in with the new regimen, Jim Herd and so on.

SS: After the buyout, they brought George in. He did it for Herd and them.

WP: Was that kind of a difficult task to begin with?

SS: Yes. It has proven down through the years. When you have, I forget the number of hours they had on TV, it was unbelievable for one person to sit down and book all the shows and all the towns they were running. It's proven down through the years, the last five years, that it can't be done.

WP: Do you think they need to cut their TV?

SS: Oh, I think they need to get some people in there to help the people that are doing it and the people they bring in have to know wrestling. You just can't bring somebody in from the top of a tower that don't know wrestling.

WP: Which they've done repeatedly since the buyout.

SS: Yeah, three or four people. You can't do that. If you have an airplane, you've got to have a pilot to fly the plane. If you're in wrestling, you've got to know what you're doing in the ring.

WP: During the last few days of Crockett, did you know things were going really badly?

SS: No, it came as a shock to me. Yeah. He was very up front about it. He was in trouble but he was sure Turner was going to buy him out and that would salvage things. What went on after Turner bought out I think really broke Jimmy's heart. A question that they could never answer is when you have an area that's already been successful, why do you stop going there?

WP: They abandoned the Carolinas?

SS: Oh, yeah. They'd run Charlotte or they'd run a Greensboro once or twice a year and the people got very resentful about it. In the small towns that we used to go into, they didn't bother. They didn't

bother to go by those towns.

WP: Now Crockett has formed his own promotion. Do you think he'll go to those areas?

SS: Probably. I haven't heard too much about it. I heard he was looking. I don't know anyone who knows for sure.

WP: Smoky Mountain goes a little into the Carolinas.

SS: We go a little into the Carolina. But we don't go to the bigger towns. We don't go into Charlotte or Greensboro.

WP: So those mid-sized towns like Fayetteville, they were the ones that were abandoned?

SS: Yeah, abandoned, when I say abandoned, I'm talking about they would come in once every four or five months. People are creatures of habit.

WP: Was there optimism with the Turner buyout?

SS: Yes, yes, we all figured that's where they would go. It had been a proven area and they went across the country to California, Kansas City. They went everywhere but to a place that's successful.

WP: When did you leave Turner?

SS: I left Turner about three years ago. I just couldn't get the point across to people that we had successful places and we weren't going to them. The backlash that came back to me was that they had to start cutting. Well, anybody with any intelligence knows when there's a buyout, sooner or later, they get rid of the people that were there and get their own people. So when that backlash started to come back and they were going to start cutting back, I knew it was a matter of time. At that time, I was event coordinator for Turner. I was handling the towns, checking up, making sure the publicity was in, buying publicity. You hit the town a month to three weeks out before the date. You go talk to the newspaper and you buy radio time. You try to get a write-up. Make our talent accessible to them.

WP: *That's kind of died out.*

SS: Well, I had a couple of situations where I lined it up and the guys didn't come, which really is one of my gripes. I mean you're in this business and when you've got an opportunity to go out and pump your trade, you should.

WP: *Who were the best as far as being cooperative?*

SS: Rock 'n Roll Express. They were always willing to go wherever they had to go. They would go everywhere, to hospitals, to schools.

WP: *Who were some of the more difficult ones?*

SS: Oh, your bigger stars. They're big stars (Rock 'n Roll), but your bigger, bigger stars.

WP: *Like Sting or Lex Luger?*

SS: No, I never had problems with those guys. Some of the guys, they told me, like the Road Warriors, I lined up some stuff and they told me, "Ha, ha, yeah, sure." I had no problems with these guys. They were there, they were on the radio. No problem at all. There were some guys as there is in everything. They just didn't want to be there.

WP: *What did you do between the time you left Turner and the time you go in contact with Cornette and Horner about Smoky Mountain?*

SS: I just took a year off. I took a year off and spent it with my family. Then Jim called me one day and told me he had an idea. So I drove down to Charlotte and talked to Horner. They asked me what I thought about it. At the time, I thought it was great. I said, "I think it can go." I was very familiar with the eastern part of Tennessee. These were places Crockett went to. We used to go to Johnson City and Kingsport all the time. I was very familiar with it.

WP: *How has it been?*

SS: Ahh, it takes a while to get going and we've got it going. It goes in cycles. It goes on and up and then it levels off and it drops

a little bit. Now, we're into another up cycle. I think we've been successful. They say it takes at least three to five years to get things really moving.

WP: *The business right now is at the lowest point it's been at in 20 years.*

SS: Yeah, and we feel pretty good about it because we're doing pretty good.

WP: *What do you have to do to go against that trend?*

SS: I think it's going back to the way wrestling was. I think leave the snakes at home and the alligators and the clowns. Bring people back into what's been around for years and years and years. Bring in new people, new faces.

WP: *The smaller towns you said have been abandoned. Is that the same situation as the region you're in now before Smoky Mountain came in?*

SS: Yeah, we go into Hickory, North Carolina; Jefferson, Morgantown, towns like that.

WP: *What are you doing for Smoky Mountain?*

SS: Handling all the buildings, booking the buildings, taking care of the box office.

WP: *What's your opinion of what's become of World Championship Wrestling?*

SS: It's sad, it's very sad because the bubble's going to break and I think there's a lot of people trying to talk to them. I know Jimmy Crockett, when he was with them would try to talk to them and explain. If the man's not tuned into your business, it's really hard to explain it to them. They've got talent, but it's people that don't understand the business or the other thought I have is that they're trying to compete with Vince McMahon and Vince McMahon is down and out. His business is flat down. Trying to compete with him and stay at a level with him has hurt them too.

WP: *The higher-ups aren't wrestling guys. But you've got executives who have been involved with the business for a number of years.*

SS: Yes, but being in the corporation is a lot different than being like the Grahams in Florida were, Ole was in Atlanta and the Crocketts were in the Carolinas. They weren't corporation people.

WP: *These are wrestlers in a corporate world.*

SS: And they don't fit.

WP: *How close are they to going out of business?*

SS: I don't think they'll go out of business, not unless Turner wants them to. One company feeds off the others. If you own three houses and one's not rented, the other two will carry the one not rented. I don't think he has a problem there. Now, Vince may have a problem because he doesn't have that many companies. I understand he's cutting way back on talent.

WP: *How does that affect Smoky Mountain?*

SS: It doesn't affect us at all.

WP: *Has working with the WWF helped Smoky Mountain in any way?*

SS: Ahh, no, no, it hasn't helped us. I think it's given those guys (Rock 'n Roll, Heavenly Bodies, Cornette) a wider range of publicity, but it hasn't helped Smoky Mountain at all.

WP: *Then why do it?*

SS: They do it because they're self-employed so we can't say no. We don't have them booked on those dates. We don't have them under contract. I think it's just work. They want the work. I think that's all it is.

WP: *What about Jim?*

SS: Well, Jim's in a different situation. Jim's a talker, a manager. He can float around if he wants to. I don't know what he'll do. He's with the Jap right now.

WP: *What's your opinion of the whole steroid scandal? How bad was steroid use when you were in?*

SS: I never saw it.

WP: *You never, ever saw it?*

SS: I have never seen anyone taking drugs or using steroids. I think they had enough respect for me to do it elsewhere. They knew I was pretty straight, down-the-middle type of guy. I wouldn't go for it. I wouldn't go for it at all. I don't drink, I don't smoke, I certainly don't do drugs.

WP: *When you were still actively wrestling, it really wasn't prominent.*

SS: No, the only thing I heard at the time when I was working was Cortisone shots for a shoulder or elbow or knee. Cortisone. We've come a long way.

WP: *Why do you think it's come a long way?*

SS: I think that maybe, I can't say this for Crockett, but I heard about it in the WWF that they promoted these guys to do it. Guys went ahead and did it. I guess they were making big money.

WP: *On the flip side, most of the guys are off it now and the promotion's at its low point.*

SS: I don't think it was that. I don't think it was the steroids. When that broke (steroid scandal), I think that parents and kids got smart to the fact that it was going on. I don't think it was all the steroids. People wanted wrestling first. They want to see two guys go at it or four guys go at it. They want to see contact. They could care less about the clowns.

WP: *So the WWF definitely isn't your cup of tea?*

SS: No, no, they've had some great talent. Take a look at what they're doing now.

WP: *It's like Ricky Steamboat. They're doing it now with him in WCW with the fire blowing and the dragon outfit. Stick him in the ring and people will pay attention.*

SS: Yes, let his talent speak for itself.

WP: *Who are some of the guys in Smoky Mountain you're pretty high on?*

SS: Well, the Rock 'n Roll, the Heavenly Bodies and a real, real, this guy would have been a great star with WCW or WWF is the Dirty White Boy. He's a gem. He doesn't

give you any problems. He cares 100 percent about this business. He just hasn't gotten that break. But in my opinion, he's up there. Tracy Smothers' always been at that status. We've got a boy in called Chris Candido, who's a great talent. We've got another young guy in, Bobby Blaze. Very good. He's going to be a big, big talent.

WP: *Do you think regionals like Smoky Mountain are on their way back?*

SS: Oh, yes, definitely. Yes, Jimmy Crockett now supposedly is going to start up. That's going to be regional. I don't think he's going to be another corporation (laughs). I think Florida is waiting there for somebody. I understand there is somebody down there. Yeah, I see it coming back.

WP: *What it is about the regionals that you think would interest fans?*

SS: It's theirs. They say, "It's our wrestling." We have people that come up from Memphis and I don't know what's going on in Memphis. I can only tell you what they tell me. They come up and say, "Jeez, I wish we had Smoky Mountain Wrestling down there so we could say that it's our wrestling." Jarrett runs down there.

WP: *The WWF is sending their guys there.*

SS: They want their own. Starrcade, for instance, was Greensboro's. Greensboro, North Carolina. That's where it was created and that's where it stayed for a few years. That was there. Christmas was Greenville, South Carolina, and the night before in Charlotte, North Carolina, and that was theirs. They could say, "Yeah, that's ours." Now, they're so far off in other places.

WP: *Tradition is gone in so many promotions.*

SS: I've always felt wrestling should be a people business. Get out there and talk to the fans. From my understanding, the WWF doesn't go for that.

WP: *Let me throw out some names and give me your opinion on them. Dusty Rhodes.*

SS: Dusty Rhodes. I worked with Dusty for about three years. A brilliant mind. He

tends to take on more work than he can handle. Very intelligent.

WP: *Ric Flair.*

SS: Oh, Ric Flair is one of the best. He was another guy I never had a problem with about radio or anything. He's a people guy. He always has time for the fans. He never tried to put up any kind of fence around him from the fans. He's a people guy.

WP: *Terry Allen.*

SS: Terry Allen to me was one of the brightest young stars in the wrestling business. I think he would have gone on to be champion. He had a bad break, but I've always gotten along with Terry. I think we lost a great star.

WP: *Ricky Steamboat.*

SS: Another great star. He had a style all his own. He could take command.

WP: *The Brisco Brothers.*

SS: Jack and Jerry, nearly as good as the Scotts. Nearly (laughs). I was with Jerry for about two years in the Carolinas as his partner and a tremendous talent. Jack, of course, a tremendous champion. They were just two down-to-earth guys.

WP: *The Phantom, our staff historian, listed the Scotts on his 10 all-time best tag teams. What made the Scotts so good?*

SS: I think the opposition we were up against. We had great teams to wrestle. We had Hanson and Hawk, the Andersons. We had the Kox Brothers. We just had great teams we went up against. We had tremendous matches. We had 13 sell-outs in Greenville, South Carolina, with the Andersons. They were tough boys and good wrestlers and you could get in there and scrap with them.

WP: *The Funks.*

SS: I wrestled Terry when he was champion. A load of knowledge about wrestling. He had his own style. He wasn't one of these guys who hurry. He took his time. He was a great champion. We've had great champions from Thesz on down.

WP: Which ones have you gotten in the ring with?

SS: When Flair first came in, we wrestled. I wrestled Thesz many times.

WP: You got in the ring with Flair when he first started. What did you think of him at that point?

SS: He was a fat boy.

WP: Didn't think much of him at that point?

SS: He had some talent, but it really didn't show what he really had. Then he really got on the ball and started working out. Flair studies a lot of things. He studies the matches. He studies the films. He wanted to be champion and he went after it. I admire the guy for it. But you could see the

talent coming along.

WP: What do you think of Smoky Mountain's future?

SS: I think it's going to be the top regional around. It already is now. There's not that many regionals around. There's just a couple. Philly, New Jersey, Memphis. I think that we're going to be the top and I think we'll be an example for others to come in.

WP: Do you think promoters should model themselves after Smoky Mountain and do you think it will bring others in?

SS: Yup, I sure do.

WP: What is the fate of the big two?

SS: I don't know about Vince. They could

be gone in five years.

WP: Would wrestling be better off that way?

SS: Oh, yes. They had their run. They had the spotlight. I'm talking about Vince now more than WCW. WCW never got off the ground. Vince, I guess you have to admire the guy for what he did. He brought a lot of people out of the closet. The wrestling fans who didn't want to admit they were wrestling fans. He brought them out of the closet and for a while, he did very good. But everything has its downfall.

WP: Anything else you want to add?

SS: Just that it's a great business. If we didn't have it, you and I wouldn't be talking right now. Let's hope it's around for a long, long time.

Letters To The Editors

Sure, I remember when an excellent article like "Memories Of Our Innocence" in Issue #43 would have generated a publishable article from me.... But... it doesn't look like it's going to, although I thought it might.

Sure, I remember the first time I discovered pro wrestling. I remember my first live card. I remember skipping supper on certain nights in 1969 in Alberta, so that I could get front row seats at Stampede Wrestling. I remember breaking all speed laws to get good seats at the Halifax Forum for a few summers in a row, every week, in the Seventies... But... I also remember not being at a live card in years and a year or two ago, my sister wanted me to make the 250-mile round trip to Halifax to see a WWF show and she would foot the bill and I said it wasn't worth my time.

Sure, I remember screaming myself hoarse at wrestling cards. I remember yelling various things at various times. I remember getting an entire arena angry by ragging on

a "good guy." I remember various wrestlers getting angry at me for things I yelled at them (not smart things, I only did that once in my life and hate the practice)... But... I also remember that I only opened my mouth twice at the last card I attended live.

Sure, I remember the first time I stood close to Andre the Giant, then known as Jean, who was about 400 something pounds legit at that time and I was 190 and thinking how huge he was.... But... I also remember being in an arena, standing in fairly close proximity to 90 percent of the guys on the card and realizing that, at 220 pounds, I was bigger than all but one of them.

Sure, I remember the first time I saw Dirty White Girl Kim Anthony on tape and thinking what a gorgeous little doll she was and how could people boo such a lovely creature. I remember thinking it would be impossible to make her look unattractive... But... not long ago, I saw a tape from SMW in which they managed to accomplish just that and in which "face" Kim came off as

a heel and "heel" Tammy Fytch came off as a face.

Sure, I remember the time my father told me wrestling was all fake. I remember refusing to believe him. I remember when I saw that he was right. I remember leaving wrestling for a few years and I remember coming back for mainly psychological reasons. I remember learning some of the intricacies of the business, and discovering the sheets. I remember that all this made my enjoyment of wrestling even better than ever... But... recently, nothing much in the wrestling world interests me. My *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* copies will sometimes sit for days untouched and I can't remember the last time I watched a wrestling tape for more than an hour at a time.

Sure, I remember lots of things. Abdullah the Butcher swearing at me in English. Maurice Vachon laughing at me. Coming close to siding with Gil Hayes against six drunks in a Calgary Bar and Grill, averted

when Bob Sweetan and a few more guys arrived. Hell, I remember lots of things... But... wrestling today is not fun. Perhaps it's me, although I doubt it. There is not a single booker in the U.S. who has a clue as to what he's doing. Yes, I include Jim Cornette in this statement. Some of it is me, I admit it. It is no longer acceptable to me to see SMW heels beating up someone and nobody comes in for a save until enough time has elapsed for the face(s) to have flown in from New York City or maybe Japan. My ability to suspend my disbelief has worn very thin. Whether this is due to some personal loss or inability or whether it's due to constant eroding caused by the aggravation of being fed crap after garbage after (I wish you guys allowed swear words!). I'm not sure. There are times that I wish I was still a total "mark." However, at times, I think others are the "marks." I've seen tapes of matches which I have seen "experts" rate very highly that I felt were lousy at best and garbage at worst.

Oh yeah, I remember calling Sherri Martel "Sensuous Sherri" about eight or so years ago. I'm anxiously awaiting my royalty check from WCW.

Rodney Leighton
Pugwash, Nova Scotia

I'm not happy about how you let Rodney Leighton screw up our Grand Champion or Yokozuna speculations. I was hoping for some subjective opinion about who were the major forces that formed the history of pro wrestling. I see no reason for the best to be limited to only those wrestlers we've witnessed. We're looking for conversation, not facts. Opinions are good enough as long as their backed up with some wrestling knowledge. I've never seen Jim Londos live, but I've collected and watched four of five of his matches on video. I've read his lifetime record published by Richard Haynes and I've read the books *Fall Guys* by Marcus Griffen, *The History of Pro Wrestling* by Nat Fleischer and *The Clarence Eklund* book by Hazel Eklund Odegard. I've gone to the library and gone

through old sports pages from Los Angeles, Chicago and New York. I've spent hours talking with respected fans and I've joined The Cauliflower Alley Club where you can actually talk to some of the great performers who knew Londos and wrestled him. From this information, I can form an opinion. True it may be way off and it may change with time and added information, but I'm entitled to it.

For years I've felt the same as The Phantom about Londos. Then at this year's Cauliflower dinner, I was surprised to see some old photos of Londos in the late Sixties. In the pictures I saw an old man that appears well received by his fellow wrestlers. Then after reading the Bronco Nagurski lifetime record, I went back to my tape collection to watch the famous match vs. Londos on November 18, 1938. What I saw changed my opinion about the old guy. Londos always played the underdog, the giant killer and in the match you can see how well it worked for him. Nagurski, a national celebrity and one of the best and most powerful football player of all time (who looked OK as a wrestler) overpowered Londos at first, but as the match progressed, Londos used leverage and knowledge to overcome him. Londos injured Nagurski's arm, then throws him around the ring before pinning him for the World Title. I was surprised that the famous Nagurski allowed this to happen. Even late in Londos' career, he had a lot of power. Londos must have known his wrestling because he wrestled Clarence Eklund in Wyoming and Eklund was a real wrestler in the strong style of Gotch, Caddock and Stecher. Eklund was a light heavyweight and they didn't come under the influence of the Trust or its style until around 1930. His policeman was Ray Steele, so Londos must have been decent in the ring. At least until he got really old. I've seen his match against Primo Carnera and it's terrible. I can't hold it against him if he worked the carnivals, ripping off the marks. All the major wrestlers did it before arena shows made big money for everyone. Londos was a poor man from Greece who ended up making big money and became famous.

You have to respect him for it no matter how he did it. They lived a hard life in those days and it's hard to judge any of those people by our standards. Rate the history of wrestling and you'll find he's not the only crook in the book. Londos' ego and his unwillingness to do jobs eventually killed his run, but he was a giant draw who made money for everyone and he was one of the people responsible for shaping wrestling. I think he belongs on the Yokozuna list.

I don't think the Phantom really rated a Yokozuna as we saw it. We weren't looking for the toughest guy in the gym. We wanted a list of pro wrestlers who entertain in the ring, draw crowds, made money and were respected for their skill and character. I enjoy all the stories about shooters and I respect them for their skills, but I value the skills of a great showman, like a Buddy Rogers or Fred Blassie much more. From the Phantom's list, I'll say Thesz, Hodge, Brisco and Gagne are given. Dick Hutton was a regular in Los Angeles when I first started watching the sport in 1962. He was one of my favorites. He was a great performer and athlete, but as the champion who followed Thesz's nine-year domination of the NWA, he's believed to have been poorly promoted and a disappointment. He lost the title in January 1959 and by 1962, he was working mid-card and semi-main events in Los Angeles. Soon after he retired to raise horses. I met him at this year's dinner and he's a great person, but that's not enough to be ranked Yokozuna.

I saw Karl Gotch wrestle in Los Angeles around 1966 and he wasn't over in any way. They booked him as a German heel who didn't cheat and it died. Like Steve Regal, Gotch was very hard to work with, always trying to prove himself and I remember him and Bill Miller intimidating and injuring the NWA champion so I couldn't call him great company man. I've seen some of his Japanese stuff vs. Robinson and Inoki and I think he's great. Maybe the greatest pure wrestler of our time, but he never dominated any area in the United

States and that and his ego stop him from making Yokozuna.

Don Leo Jonathan wrestled in Los Angeles through 1963 and 1964. He was one of the biggest names in the game. He was a huge man who would do a few acrobatic moves in every match, but he was methodical and I never saw him generate much heat. He was in a secondary position to the Destroyer, Blassie, Bearcat Wright, Mr. Moto and Edouard Carpentier and never pushed any of them. He had no fire and just seemed like a talented professional. I can't imagine Brusier Brody being on any card and not getting himself over. His ego wouldn't allow it and I believe that's a good thing. I watched Jonathan for two years and he was okay, but that was a disappointment. I've watched films of him in the early Fifties against Thesz, their 1975 match in Japan and even into the Eighties in Germany. He was in great shape until the end and one of the greats of all time. But on my list of great big men, he'd be behind Killer Kowalski, Fritz Von Erich, Gene Kiniski, Brody, Stan Hansen and Leon White. It must be said that I never saw him in Canada where he

dominates and I'll keep looking for film and maybe my opinion will change, but as for now he's not a Yokozuna.

Yoshiaki Yatsu during the mid-Eighties caught the eye of Dave Meltzer and got himself a good reputation, but by the time he jumped to SWS in 1989, he was fat and out of shape. His career has been a disappointment ever since. He's now back in New Japan and their doing nothing with him. Just because you make the Japanese national team doesn't make you a great worker. Japan is a nation for good workers, not good shooters. Yatsu is one of my least favorite wrestlers and I wouldn't put him on my list of top 400 wrestlers of all time. At the gym, I respect girls on the stairmasters more than Yatsu.

I'm not trying to discredit or show disrespect to Gotch, Hutton or Jonathan, they're classic wrestlers. I'm just trying to protect the rating of grand champion, which should be reserved for the very elite if we're going to play the game right.

Steve Yohe
Montebello, CA

P&D - Three points of interest. First, in Issue #44, The Phantom specifically stated he was looking at pure wrestlers in his tournament. While other elements are important, and in some cases, perhaps more important than pure wrestling ability, he was very specific in noting that his version of the Yokozuna was based on ability and nothing else. Second, while Jim Londos certainly was an important wrestler when it comes to shaping the game of professional wrestling, in no way shape or form can his activities of fraudulently taking money from people at carnivals or his financial dealings with other wrestlers be considered laudable activities, regardless of his success, fame or ancestry. Indeed, if the term Yokozuna being applied to professional wrestling is synonymous with the sumo definition, then honor is an integral component of becoming and being a Yokozuna. If that is the case, then con-artists like Jim Londos and classless bullies like Leon White could never qualify for such a distinction, as their contemptible behavior would disqualify them from consideration of the "grand champion" title; even in the world of professional wrestling. Finally, readers are still encouraged to send in their Yokozuna lists, as it is an interesting exercise and it is a lot of fun to pick out who were the true greats of professional wrestling.

The Phantom Of The Ring

Local Boy Makes Good (Sort Of)

If one was to stage a mythical "shooting" tournament among the pre-Lou Thesz wrestling champions, predicting the winner would be the easiest thing in the world. Who else could it be except Strangler Lewis?

Not that the Strangler wasn't an accomplished faker. He was. However, what makes Lewis truly unique in the history of wrestling is that he was a genuinely tough guy who could fake it with the best of them. He was also one of the few wrestling champions who could see beyond

his nose and do a job when the circumstances were right. Lewis made his own way in the ring and had a sense of the game few others would share.

Strangler Lewis was born Robert Julius Fredericks at his family farm in Nukoosa, Wisconsin. Not much is known of his early life, except that he excelled in sports. One thing worth noting is that he did not have a carnival background, but rather an extensive amateur background garnered from many hours at his local YMCA.

This background, combined with his excellence in other sports, earned him a scholarship to the University of Kentucky at Lexington. While at Kentucky, he took part in football, wrestling, baseball and found time for track and field. Things were going fine until his junior year, when his scholarship was revoked when it was discovered he was playing professional baseball during the summer. Lewis was named in a fixing scheme, taking money to throw games. It was really no wonder that he found professional wrestling attractive.

Lewis broke into professional wrestling in 1913, and the way he did so was typical for the game. Billy Sandow, a noted wrestling manager and promoter of the time, had brought his latest discovery, Youssouf "the Terrible Turk" Houssein to Louisville. Unfortunately, the Turk's opponent canceled his appearance, which caused Sandow and co-promoter Jack Herman to search for a last-minute replacement.

After touring the local YMCA, Fredericks was selected to be the sacrificial goat. He agreed to do the job to Youssouf for \$50. The thought of such a tyro actually defeating the Turk never entered the heads of Sandow, Herman, or the Turk. They all believed that he was the mat giant he was made out to be.

But Sandow bungled everything when he told young Fredericks that the Turk had to catch a train to Chicago later that night; Fredericks should do the gentlemanly thing and drop two straight falls in 20 minutes. Fredericks said the deal was off. His friends and employers were in the audience, and, while he didn't promise them he would win, he didn't expect to lose in such a humiliating manner. Sandow replied that he would then have no choice but to let the Turk shoot on the young grappler. Lewis smiled and told Sandow to go right ahead.

Sandow turned the Turk loose and received the surprise of his life. Lewis had little trouble throwing the Turk in two falls, winning both with a headlock so powerful the Turk lost consciousness during the second fall. When Sandow showed up in Chicago three days later, he brought along a new competitor: none other than Robert Julius Fredericks, now known as Ed "Strangler" Lewis, master of the headlock.

Lewis needed polishing, and so was entered in as many tournaments as possible. The idea of a tournament was a holdover from Europe, used by promoters to distance their contest from the single matches staged in carnivals and, thus, legitimize their event. Sandow also brought in a trainer for his new discovery; highly recommended from

none other than Farmer Burns. His name was Joseph "Toots" Mondt, and he, Lewis and Sandow would come to control the game through the mid-Thirties, known as "the Gold Dust Trio." Mondt, more than anyone else, is the man responsible for shaping wrestling as we know it today.

Consolidating their hold on the game, Lewis went over as champ, defeating Joe Stecher on December 13, 1920. Lewis dominated wrestling in the Twenties, losing only eight bouts. Seen by the public as a genuine matman, one who didn't need the help of a gimmick to wrestle, anyone who defeated him had to be the real thing. Also in his favor was that he was not an ethnic wrestler. Ethnic wrestlers were distrusted by the public. In their eyes "ethnic" equaled "immigrant." Organized crime was dominated by ethnic types (Irish, Italians and Jews); anything involving an ethnic wrestler was suspect.

Thus, if a wrestler defeated Lewis, the bout was automatically viewed as legitimate. This was how Lewis was able to put over a nonentity like Wayne Munn as champion. According to newspaper accounts of the match, Munn lifted Lewis off his feet and threw the champion out of the ring, causing injuries so severe that Lewis had to be taken to the hospital.

When 50-year-old Stan Zbyszko double-crossed Munn for the title with ease, Lewis immediately issued a challenge to the new champion. Zbyszko, knowing what Lewis could do to him, wisely dropped the belt to Joe Stecher, who then obligingly dropped it back to Lewis.

The Thirties saw a reversal in the fortunes of the Gold Dust Trio. Promoters such as Ray Fabiani, Paul Bowser, Tony Stecher and Gus Karras were able to dilute their power, and, combined with the physical deterioration of Lewis, finally smashed the Trio's hold on the game. Lewis had fallen victim to the dreaded trachoma, a disease contracted through physical contact on unsanitary mats, and which, if not treated

in time, led to blindness. In those days, wrestling was worked in boxing rings and since a boxer spent little time on the canvas, the mats were rarely changed. Wrestlers, though, spent most of their time wriggling on the mat. Almost every leading grappler of the period was treated for trachoma. The disease was finally conquered when athletic commissions insisted on sanitary standards.

Still Lewis was beloved by the public, making personal appearances at fairs, ball games, and on the radio, in addition to his wrestling schedule. His was the stuff of legend. Even the *Guinness Book of World Records* states that he fought 6,200 bouts in a 44-year career, losing only 33 matches. Renowned wrestling historian J. Michael Kenyon researched Lewis' career and recorded 118 losses, also noting that Lewis' ring career lasted 35, not 44, years. The only thing to be learned from all this is that we are all marks, the Guinness people included.

Alcoholism and blindness would force him from the ring in 1937, but he became religious in 1941, and this not only cured his alcoholism, but also enabled him to see well enough to continue his wrestling career. Of course, the need for money was behind it all. His wrestling career would last until early 1948, when his body followed the course of his eyes and finally gave out.

Deprived of his main source of income, the Strangler was hit by hard times. He had earned over \$1.5 million during his long career, but had never saved a dime. He helped Leroy McGuirk run the Tulsa office, training such future luminaries as Dick Hutton and Danny Hodge. His financial situation became such that the other promoters bestowed a "Commissioner of Wrestling" title on him, with a salary reputed to be \$25,000 per year. In reality it was about \$5,000. Eventually, his worsening condition eventually forced him into a nursing home and he passed away almost unnoticed at the age of 76, unmourned by the game he helped shape.

NEXT ISSUE...

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